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# Jail plans no changes in screening

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NORTHAMPTON — The Hampshire County sheriff's office does not plan to make any changes in screening procedures after a prisoner entered the jail last month with a pill bottle containing drugs concealed in a body cavity.

Jail officials said they believe inmate screening procedures are effective and thorough, though not 100 percent foolproof, and there are no plans to amend them.

On Feb. 9, Travis M. Mitchell, 38, of Florence, allegedly smuggled drugs into the Hampshire County Jail where he was sent after he could not make bail during his arraignment in Northampton District Court on stalking and harassment charges.

Mitchell, who was strip-searched when entering the jail, hid the pill bottle containing cocaine and suboxone in his rectum and later told investigators he did this at the courthouse. Officers said they found the drugs Feb. 10 in Mitchell's pocket during a search of his cell the day after he arrived at the jail, according to court records.

Mitchell pleaded not guilty Thursday in Northampton District Court to the new charges of drug possession and assault with a deadly weapon. The latter charge resulted from an incident Feb. 15 when he allegedly threw a lunch tray at a jail guard.

When a strip search is carried out, officers are instructed to visually inspect and never touch, said Patrick Cahillane, assistant superintendent at the jail.

"Could something get by on a strip search? Sure it could," Cahillane said. "If you wanted a 100-percent solution, what you'd do is take everyone to the local hospital and X-ray them. But that's an unrealistic expectation."

Maj. Daniel Hart, an assistant deputy superintendent in charge of security, estimates there are around around half a dozen attempts to smuggle contraband into the jail each year. Any time there's a successful attempt, he said, procedures are evaluated.

"We look at how we got beat and why we got beat," Hart said. "We look to see if we dropped the ball ... or if we can do something different."

After the evaluation of Mitchell's case, which included interviews with involved officers and staff, Hart said no changes would be made in the screening process.

Not every inmate undergoes a strip search, Hart said.

After 176 former inmates sued the Hampden County Sheriff's Office for violating strip-search procedures in 2011, mandatory strip-searches ceased at the jail, he added.

Now, strip searches are only used when there is evidence a prisoner may be trying to conceal contraband. Hart also said prisoners entering the jail charged with drug and weapons-related offenses or violent crimes undergo a strip search.

If a guard suspects contraband may be concealed in a body cavity, those prisoners are subjected to what's called a "one-on-one" – when an officer is in the same room and monitors their bathroom usage, Hart said.

"It's not a pleasant experience for the inmate or the officer," he added.

What do inmates try to sneak in most? Drugs and cigarettes, Hart said.

"It's scary what they can get in and what they can do when they get in here," he said. "We try as hard as we can to keep it out."

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